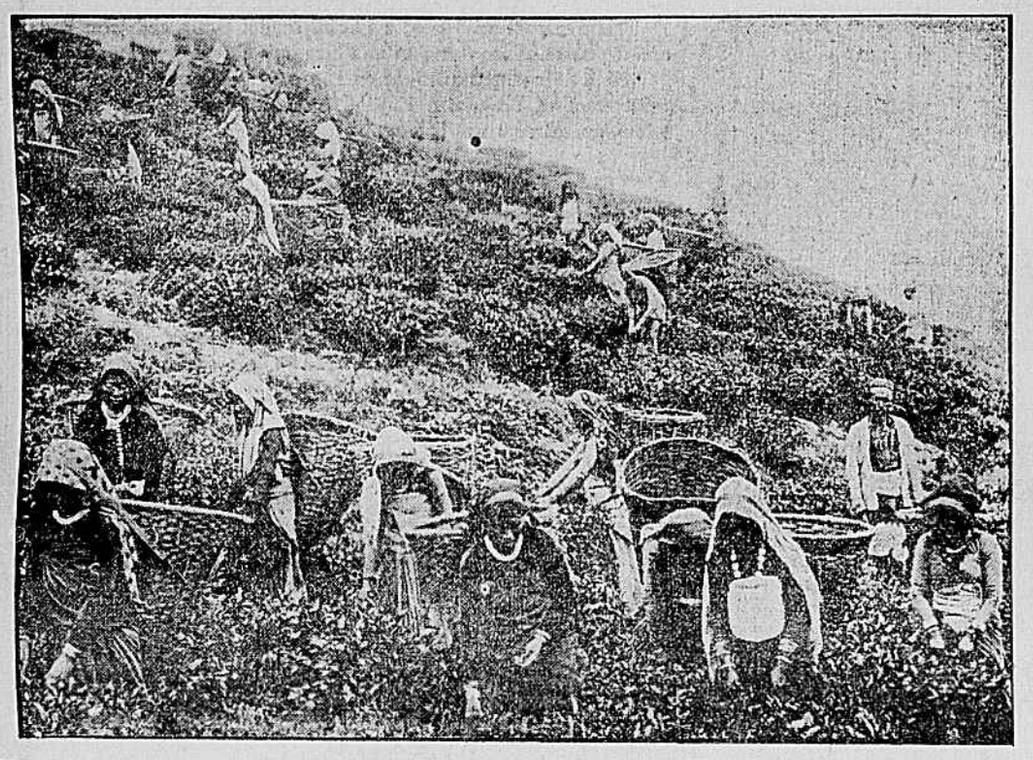
East India's Big Tea Industry---All About Plantations of the Himalayas---Advertising Which Paid---Visit to Factory

LEPCHAS OF THE HIMALAYAS. THESE PEOPLE CHURN TEA AS WE CHURN BUTTER.

WEIGHING TEA AT HANKOW.



PICKING TEA NEAR DARJEELING.

THREE LITTLE TEA PICKERS.

BY FRANK G. CARPENTER.

Darjeeling, 1910.

Come take a cup of tea with me this bright Sunday morning while I tell you how this shrub, which cheers but does not inebriate, is grown out here in the Himalaya Mountains, on the opposite side of the globe. There are hundreds of tea plantations all around me, and millions of pounds of their product are annually shipped from here to other parts of the world.

How to Make Tea.

Before I begin let us start the water boiling. It should be fresh from the spring and should not bubble over ten minutes before used for brewing. We will put the tea in a porcelain pot and let the hot water remain upon it not more than eight minutes, and it will then be ready for drinking. Tea should never touch metal and it should not stand in the pot after brewing. It should never be boiled in the pot, and it should be drunk clear, for milk makes it poison. Good tea does not need sugar, although a slice of lemon will add to the flavor.

The tea we are using comes from the mountains nearby. It is black, and is flavored with flowers. Green tea is not fit to drink. This is especially so of many varieties sold in the stores. Some of that cured in Japan and China, of which we consume thirty-odd million dollars' worth every year, is made green by the addition of coloring matters, and it is also rolled and fired in copper-lined kettles. The best tea is black tea, and you will go far before you will get better than that raised here at Darjeeling.

You remember the temperance landlady's remark to her bibulous boarder: "I will sleep you and eat you, but I be blest if I drink you." In that sense India bids fair to soon drink the world. Her black teas have practically monopolized the markets of Europe, and more of them are consumed than of the teas exported from all other nations. A generation or so ago about the only teas known to commerce were those of Japan and China. The India teas are now driving the Chinese teas out of the markets, and Japan has to rely almost entirely upon the United States for the sale of her surplus. We drink 86,000,000 pounds of tea every year, and of this 31,000,000 pounds come from Japan and about 28,000,000 from China. We get only 8,000,000 from East India, but this amount is increasing from year to year. The exports of Indian teas are mostly to Europe. They go to Great Britain and thence to the colonies. Some are sent to the Continent, and big shipments are made to Australia and Canada. The British are the greatest tea drinkers of all mankind. Their consumption amounts to six or seven pounds per head every year, while our people each drink less than two pounds and the Russians less than one. The Germans and French load themselves with coffee and wine or beer, sipping tea now and then. The Chinese and Japanese drink tea throughout the day. The Chinese will not drink water unless it is boiled, and they flavor the water with tea. The consumption of these two nations is probably greater than that of all the rest of the world put together, but for the lack of statistics no one knows what it is.

How Advertising Pays.

The exports of Indian tea now amount to over 350,000,000 pounds per year. Of this more than 200,000,000 pounds are from Hindustan and about 150,000,000 pounds from the Island of Ceylon, over the way. The trade has grown up within the past thirty years, and it is largely based upon good advertising. When I was here twenty years ago it was in its infancy and the planters were discussing how they could get the American market. They concluded to advertise in the newspapers and they raised a fund to begin that work in Europe and the United States. At the same time they organized a sales bureau and they saw to it that Ceylon and Indian teas could be had in all the large stores, and that they were on tap at every State and national exposition. As a result the demand for these teas steadily grew, and to-day their exports are almost twice those of China and more than five times those of Japan. Within the last few years the East Indian planters have decided to enter the green tea markets, and they are now advertising such varieties in the same way. Ceylon alone has already spent in the neighborhood of $1,000,000 on green tea information, with such a result that the Chinese and Japanese are alarmed, fearing that they may lose this trade, of which they still have the monopoly.

The Ceylon planters have been giving bounties of from 3 to 7 cents a pound upon all green tea exported, and they have increased their crop within the past few years, so that it now amounts to millions of pounds. I understand that the Chinese government is alarmed at the situation and that the Chinese tea planters recently sent a commission to India and Ceylon to investigate tea conditions and the tea-curing processes.

Tea Raising in China and India.

I have traveled extensively through the tea fields of Japan and China and I know something about them. The methods of cultivation and curing are far different there than they are on these big plantations of Hindustan. In the former countries the tea is raised in small patches. The ordinary tea garden of Japan is not much bigger than a city lot, and that of China would not be larger than the ordinary American garden. The tea is raised by a multitude of small farmers, each of whom works after his own rule and in his own way. When the leaves are picked there are traders who go about through the tea districts and buy up the crops. They sell to other traders and one crop may go through a half dozen different hands before it is shipped to Hankow, where it gets one of the big steamers for Europe.

Here in India the plantations are large. Some of them have hundreds of acres and employ thousands of men and women as laborers. They are handled after business methods. The soil is studied and carefully cultivated. At present there is more than $100,000,000 invested in the business, and in the neighborhood of 600,000 people are employed upon the plantations. The area under cultivation is steadily increasing and it is said that the crop may be raised all along the southern slopes of the Himalayas at an altitude of about 3,000 feet above the sea. The plantations here are 6,000 or 7,000 feet up and there are some tea fields which are a full half mile above sea level. The most of the land used is flat or rolling and the best soil is a reddish sandy loam with a free subsoil. The tea seeds are first planted in beds. After they have sprouted and reached the age of a year, they are set out in rows a few feet apart. They are carefully cultivated and trimmed, in order to make them grow bushy. The soil is often top dressed with woodloam and artificial manures are frequently used. As to the droppings of cattle, none are to be had in India, for the people pick them up and use them for fuel. After the plants are three years old they are ready for plucking. The leaves are carefully pulled, a certain number being left to keep the plants growing. It takes five or six years for a shrub to mature and at that time it should produce a pound or more of tea every year. Some of the trees about here are forty years old and there are some in China whose age is so great that no one knows when they were planted.

How a Tea Plant Looks.

But let me tell you how the tea looks in the fields. In the plantations about here the plants range in height from one's waist to his head. Some have trunks six inches in diameter and others mere stems. The leaves are like those of the willow tree. They smell like tea when you crush them. The shrub is a species of the camellia. It is an evergreen not unlike the maple, and the leaves are beautiful. The plant is supposed to have come originally from China, but there is no account of its having been cultivated until about 350 A. D. It grows wild on this side of the Himalayas, and there are certain varieties of it which reach the height of small trees. The planters are crossing the various varieties in their attempts to make new and better teas.

I passed through many of these plantations on my ride up the mountains. The shrubs rise in terraces up the sides of the hill, looking not unlike well trimmed boxwood hedges. Here and there one sees gaily dressed women picking the leaves, their black skins and bright calico gowns showing out against the green, while their jewelry flashes in the sun. Each woman has a basket which will hold about two bushels, on her back, kept there by a band which rests over the forehead. The leaves are plucked with the hands and thrown into the baskets, which, when full, are carried to the factory. I am told that the planters usually have five pickings a year, and on the best lands they have seven. This is far ahead of China and Japan, where the shrub that will yield three pickings is good.

The tea planters here are chiefly British. Many of the estates are owned by companies. The planters live in fine bungalows surrounded by lawns and gardens. Many of them are the second sons of noble families in England.

Making Tea by Machinery.

The processes of making tea in India are different from those of Japan and China. In the latter countries nearly everything is done by hand and the methods are insanitary to an extreme. In China the leaves are sorted by women and girls and the moisture is pressed out of them by treading them with bare feet. They are rolled over and over on bamboo trays with the hand and are fired in red-hot pans by half-naked, perspiring workmen.

It is the same in Japan. I once visited a large firing establishment at one of the ports where they were preparing green tea for the American market. They were curing it by what is known as pan-firing. Imagine a long row of ovens filled with copper pans each twenty inches wide and thirty inches deep. The tops of the ovens were at about the height of a man's waist or just high enough to enable one to stir the contents about with the hands. There were at least thirty of these pans, and over each bent a Japanese woman, her dress pulled down to her waist and the upper part of her body as bare as the Venus de Medici. Each was stirring and kneading and rolling the drying tea. The fires were hot and the steam rose. Pearl drops of perspiration stood out upon the backs and busts of the workers, and it seemed to me as though the tea might be brewed by the sweat. It took those women almost an hour to finish each lot, and after that the teas were put up by hand.

Here in India the tea is all rolled by machinery. Every plantation has its factories, where the leaves are withered and rolled between steel plates so carefully graduated that they do not injure the tea. The drying is done by hot blasts and revolving fans, and the result is that the tea comes out perfectly pure and clean. It is carefully graded and packed while warm in lead-lined chests for shipment abroad.

The Hindoos Do Not Drink.

The chief tea drinkers of Asia are north of the Himalaya Mountains. On the other side of these hills the natives soak themselves in tea, and in Tibet and the other Asiatic highlands the people make tea soup, mixing the brew with milk, butter and other fats. Down here in Hindustan the Hindoos drink almost no tea, and the Mohammedans but little. The custom is increasing somewhat among the town's people, but there are millions in India who have never seen a tea leaf or sipped a tea cup. Over in Burma they have a way of pickling the leaves of the tea plant and eating them for dessert, as we eat cheese. The leaves are thrown into boiling water and left there until soft. They are then rolled on mats by hand and rammed into a tube of bamboo cane, which is stopped up and buried in the ground until the tea has become pickled, when it is ready for sale. The leaves are also prepared with a mixture of oil and salt, and sometimes with assafoetida. It smells like limberger cheese, but it is said to be good for digestion, and is considered a dainty. It is used upon ceremonial occasions. Another method of preparing it is to throw the leaves, after they have been steamed and flavored, into pits of masonry or wells lined with plank or bamboo, and then to press the tea down with a heavy weight. The Burmese are now making a half million pounds of pickled tea every year.

I am told that some the Himalayan tribes churn tea as we churn butter. The tea is mixed with soda and put on to boil. When it is quite hot butter and milk are added, and the whole is put into a tea churn. After it has been well shaken about it is taken out with the foam on it, when it is ready for drinking. The Tibetans and Mongols serve their tea in a somewhat similar manner, using the brick tea prepared by the Russians.

In a Russian Tea Factory.

During my recent stay in China I went through some of the factories at Hankow, and there saw how brick tea is made. Hankow is the chief tea market of China. It is 600 miles in the interior, on the wide Yangtse River, which is so deep that the biggest ocean steamers can carry their cargoes from there to every part of the world. The chief tea fields lie south of the Yangtse, and most of them are some distance from Hankow. The tea is brought on the backs of the men to the river and is shipped up the numerous tributaries of the Yangtse. At Hankow it is prepared in all sorts of ways for the market. There are exporting firms there who manufacture for the United States, some who deal chiefly with England, and also representatives of the French and German importing houses. The Russians have the largest houses, and they monopolize the brick tea industry, annually shipping millions of bricks to Vladivostok and Odessa, to Tibet and Mongolia, and also over the Transsiberian Railroad to Russia. Many of the bricks are carried part of the way on camels, and not a few go overland into Russian Turkestan.

One of the factories I visited covered more than an acre of ground. It employed a thousand Chinese, and it had on hand 1,500,000 pounds of tea pressed into bricks and ready for export. The bricks filled the whole upper floors of the factory. They were laid up in piles, much as we stack bricks for building, with narrow aisles running here and there through the room. They had been taken from the molds and left in the warehouse to cure. Each kind of tea had its own place, and I saw some from Ceylon which had been shipped to Hankow to be made into bricks before going to Russia.

How Brick Tea Is Made.

I was shown the whole process of brick tea making. The tea is first ground to a dust and then sifted by half-naked coolies, who stuff their nostrils with cotton batting to keep the dust out of their lungs. These men are naked to the waist, and the perspiration stood out on their yellow skins. The air was like a Russian bath and the sweat poured. I took up a handful of the tea dust and tasted it. It was rather sweet, but there is but little tea flavor about it. It is as thick as granulated tobacco. The men scoop up the tea dust with brass shovels, each of which holds about two pounds, or enough for a brick. This is poured into a cloth and steamed over boiling water. When it has become damp a little more dust is added and the whole is emptied into a rough wooden bowl about a foot square. It now goes to the press, and a great weight packs the tea dust into a brick almost as hard as one of burned clay. The bricks are left in the molds two hours to cool and then taken off to be dried. They are of different sizes and shapes and of many grades. Some bring as high prices as the costliest teas we have in America. They are made of the first pickings of the tea, ground to a dust and steamed and pressed into shape. Another quality is made of later pickings, and still another of the refuse of the factories, consisting of coarse leaves, broken tea and the dust from the tables and floors of establishments where they put up tea in chests. Both green and black teas are used, the bricks of the former looking for all the world like plugs of tobacco, while the latter are a deep chocolate brown. The bricks are beautifully stamped, sometimes with the figure of a dragon and always with the name of the firm which sells them.

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